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ABSTRACT

In the area of language instruction, a network of ecological relationships exists among the teacher, the child, and the text--the sustaining and nurturing of these relationships is at the heart of whole language instruction. Moreover, this network of relationships falls prey to neither of the unsustainable extremities of "gericentrism" (appealing to the authority of age, convention, or tradition) and "pedocentrism" (child-centered pedagogy). This notion of "ecological relationships" can be used as a metaphor to make possible a different reading of some controversies in the area of whole language instruction. Whole language is an attempt to reconnect language with the vitality of children's (and adults's) lives, experiences and imagination, and to reconnect this vitality to the grander texts and textures of the Earth. What whole language has to offer, and what it is up against, links up to deep-seated philosophical and epistemological and cultural tides and currents that must be unearthed if the living interconnections that have made whole language so attractive are to be nurtured. Whole language opens up the risk-laden task of paying attention to what is needed specifically, with this task of writing, and that moment of reading. Whole language makes teachers' lives more difficult and risk-laden, and makes their relations with language and with children more vibrant and full, more painful and more joyful. Whole language instruction, at its heart, is an attentiveness to signs of teachers' deep engagement with language. (Contains 24 references.) (RS)

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Whole Language as an Ecological Phenomenon:

On Sustaining the Agonies of Innovative Language Arts Practices

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Whole Language as an Ecological Phenomenon:
On Sustaining the Agonies of Innovative Language Arts Practices

In our work in student-teacher education and practicum supervision, we are witnessing an often repeated scenario that is indicative, in part, of the emergence into common currency of innovative language arts practices at the elementary school level. A text will be being discussed by a teacher and a group of children, and each individual child will be encouraged to express his or her understanding of this text. The teacher, too, will express his or her understanding of the text. These episodes often end with the teacher asking questions to each child about their understanding, but, in the end, confirming the multiplicity of readings with statements like "we all have different understandings/experiences," indicating that we all somehow "make meaning" out of the text in different ways. The young student, in such a situation, could not but agree. Their individual voice had been listened to and their experience and understanding had been valued and "confirmed." (Noddings, 1984).

We can see in incidents like this hints of the profound power of recent innovations in language arts practices. It expresses, in a small and intimate way, the opening up of the task of interpretation and the empowerment of students to discover and articulate their own understandings of the texts and textures of human experience. Rather than offering an "authoritative" and potentially foreclosing interpretation, the teacher opens up the text to its fluid interpretive possibilities, an opening up which leaves room for the child's understanding and experience to come forward and be articulated.

These sorts of episodes express, as well, the deeply human relief felt

in the face of what has been coined "whole language instruction." The intent of this kind of instruction is to re-invest language with its rich, ambiguous formative power (Berthoff, 1986), allowing teachers and students alike to fall in love with language once again. By removing the need to always begin with prescribed formalistic strictures, this approach anticipates that forms and order will emerge "from within," from and in response to a fluent and creative dwelling in language and its deeply communicative contours.

However, there are also hints of some deep-seated dangers here as well. One could easily read these incidents as cases of both abandoning the child to her own understanding and abandoning the text to any possible interpretation. It seems all too easy to understand the teacher's confirming response to the multiplicity of voices, not as a warranted response to foreclosing notions of authority, but as as the simple abandonment of any authority whatsoever. Certainly the teacher has protected the integrity of the child's attempts to understand the text. But, we have to ask, what has the teacher done to protect the integrity of the text from the child's attempts to understand? And, if we ask this, can we avoid slipping back into the foreclosing authority of the text? We seem to be stuck with "the old unilateral options between gericentrism (appealing to the authority of age, convention, tradition, nostalgia) and pedocentrism (child-centered pedagogy) [which] only produce monstrous states of seige." (Smith, 1988, p.177) Put a little differently, we seem to be "riding the pendulum" (Stahl, 1990) all over again, swinging uncontrollably between unsustainable extremes.

Our concern is that whole language is unnecessarily reading itself into and against these extremities. It slips into the language and tenor of pedocentrism and sets itself at seige with more "traditional" features of

language instruction.

Hannah Arendt (1967) provides another formulation of this dilemma. She speaks of the child needing protection from the vicisstudes of the world (as the teacher might be doing in protecting the child's voice in the sort of episode mentioned above). However, the world, too (in the above-cited cases, the text under consideration), needs protection from the "onslaught of the new that bursts upon it with each new generation." (Arendt, 1967, p. 186) Arendt goes on to coin this delicate balance that defines, for her and for us, the task of education:

> Education is the point at which we decide whether we love the world enough to assume responsiblity for it and by the same token save it from that ruin which, except for renewal, except for the coming of the new and the young, would be inevitable. And education, too, is whether we decide that we love our children enough not to expell them from our world, and leave them to their own devices, nor to strike from their hands their chance of undertaking something new, something unforseen by us, but to prepare them in advance for the task of renewing a common world. (p. 196)

We believe that, in the area of language instruction, this "common world" consists of a network of <u>ecological relationships</u> that exist between the teacher, the child, and the text, and that the sustaining and nurturing of these relationships is at the heart of whole language instruction. Moreover, we suggest that this network of ecological relationships falls prey to neither of the unsustainable extremities of pedocentrism or gericentrism. We wish to use this notion of "ecological relationships" as a metaphor which makes

possible a different reading of some of the current controversies in the area of whole language instruction.

It is no accident that the current enamourment with whole language instruction is erupting now, in the midst of a deepening awareness of ecology and the integrity of the "implicate order" (Bohm, 1. ,) of the Earth. Whole language is, in telling ways, akin to an "ecological" movement, posing questions regarding the living integrity and wholeness of language, just as ecology is posing for us questions of the living integrity and wholeness of our Earthly lives. Ecology is reminding us that our desire and ability to analytically disassemble living systems must be brought up short in the face of the delicate wholeness of such systems, which cannot sustain such disassemblage without losing their vitality and life. So, too, whole language instruction speaks of the intimate interweaving of reading, writing, listening, speaking and of the interrelatedness of meaning, form and purpose. All of these are bound up into a living whole, the indiscriminate disassemblage of which belies the life of language.

Certainly distinctions can be made and analysis can be performed. What is questioned in whole language instruction is the belief that such analysis is always and everywhere called for as if understanding language somehow necessitates breaking it down into its smallest and most easily managed bits and pieces. This belief contains a deeply rooted epistemological presumption (Field, 1991; Jardine, 1990, 1990a) about life and language akin to the ecologically disasterous presumption that our relation to the Earth must always and everywhere be directed to the control of nature through the isolation and manipulation of living systems into separate, "dead and lifeless things." (Merchant, 1980)

Clearly, then, the move to whole language instruction involves more than a simple surface shift of instructional techniques, the replacement of old theory with new, or a switching of paradigms (Edelsky, 1990). Certainly it entails these things, but it is more than that. At a deeper level, it involves a fundamental shift in our relation to and dwelling in language, coupled with a shift in our understanding of ourselves and our place in the world. As Martin Heidegger notes, "if it is true that [we] find the proper abode of our existence in language -- whether we are aware of it or not -- then an experience we undergo with language will touch the innermost nexus of our existence." (1971, p. 57)

Whole language is an attempt to reconnect language with the vitality of children's (and adult's) lives, experiences and imagination and to reconnect this vitality to the grander texts and textures of the Earth, to the rhythmic unfolding of human life itself and the long-standing traditions and expressions of that life. It is not, therefore, the dissolving of such texts and textures into the idiosyncracy of this or that child's experiences and understandings (pedocentrism). It values these experiences and understandings, not by abandoning them to individuality and interiority, but by drawing them out <u>into</u> these texts and textures so that the child will be able to see their own experiences as wound up in implications, rhythms and relationships that go beyond themselves, that challenge, change and educe what the child knows.

The ecological metaphor works well here: the child's experience constitutes the eruption of "new growth" in the midst of the old, a type of regenerativity and renewal without which the living system would degenerate; the child's experience is thus exquisite and irreplaceable. It is also <u>fitting</u> -- it belongs here in the middle of things, wound up in implications and

relations that sustain it, upon which it feeds, and which it renews through relations of mutuality and inter-dependence.

Through such relations of mutuality and inter-dependency, both the integrity of the child's experience and the integrity of the text can be sustained. The child puts the text into question; but, at once, the text must be allowed to put the child into question. Either extreme in isolation is, as we now understand, ecologically unsustainable. Should we begin with an authoritative, foreclosing reading of the text, we are saying, in essence, that the text is already understood and that the child's reading -- a new, regenerative reading -- is essentially unnecessary. Should we begin at the other extreme that says that the text is equivalent and reducible to any and all experiences of it, we are saying, in essence, that the text offers the child nothing new, no resistance, expansion or challenge to their understanding. This is not regenerative, but rather the scattering of the integrity of the text into the babble of differences in experience, understanding and interpretation. Often there is nothing to hold this multiplicity together except self-aggrandizing "sharing" and mutual confirmation.

In both these cases, child and text become disconnected. Either of these extremes makes the task of understanding far too easy: at the one extreme, only one reading will do (gericentrism); at the other, any reading will do (pedocentrism). Both are "ecologically disasterous," for both begin with a profound and unsustainable disconnectedness from the fundamental, tensive inter-relationships, inter-dependencies and integrities that lie at the heart of language.

A considerate and careful reading of a text is one that is attentive to

what is already at work, but one that also brings to bear all we have to offer. It links up our lives to what is already at work in the text and links up the text to what is already at work in our lives. It is not a matter of understanding the text out of relation to ourselves and our lives (some fanciful notion of "objectivity" or "literalism"). On the contrary, it is a matter of understanding the deeply inevitable relations between our lives and the text that we are always already caught up in, that we are already "living through" as Rosenblatt (1978) would say.

Thus, too, in writing, a considerate and careful attention to what we are writing about does not entail a denial of our own individual voice, but requires, rather, that our deep and inevitable relation to what we are writing about be brought forth. This means that we never give expression just to ourselves, but at once give expression to something other than ourselves. For example, my three year old daughter, overjoyed at finding the first opened flower on the hedge, jumped up and down and said "Dad, Dad, summer's, here, summer's here!" It would be all to easy to respond innocently to this by simply saying that it is a wonderful expression of her thoughts and feelings. But what the child has also expressed, for us all, is the approach of summer. Her words are not simply the voicing of her "inner states."

Once we acknowledge this connectedness to the phenomenon of summer, we realize that not just anything would do in expressing this phenomenon well. The child's thoughts and feelings are "up against" something, connected to something, about something, responsible to it and for it. Because she was not just expressing her inner thoughts and feelings, this child's words made available to us all, in a new way, a familiar, long-standing phenomenon -- the coming of summer -- in which we are all caught up in different (interwoven)

ways. She thus expressed a deep, abiding kinship between reader, author, text and topic. More than this, her words, once expressed, stand in a tradition of expression: they fit, they are fitting, they are "housed" (eco), they have a "place," all of us have heard and seen this and felt this before. Her words not only lead us all to an intentional object about which she has spoken; they also reference a history, a tradition, a "common world" (Arendt, 1967) of which her voice and her words and her actions are both a regenerative example and an exception. To treat this as nothing more than the voicing of individual thoughts and feelings is to abandon this child to her own devices (Arendt, 1967). Perhaps even worse, such a treatment would abandon our pedagogic responsibility. The fitting answer to her joy is "Yes," in this one small flower, "summer is here!"

It is in this way that tradition and authority are not necessarily oppressive of the individual, as James Berlin (1988) [1] would have us believe. Rather, a vital relation to tradition ensues when we understand that:

> there is much that we need that we cannot get from our contemporaries -- even assuming that the work we have from them is the best that is possible: they cannot give us the sense of the longevity of human experience. . . [a] sense of continuity. . .a sense of our perennial nature. Without [these] we are necessarily the prey of fashion. (Berry 1983, p. 13-4)

Those involved in the "hard sell" of whole language instruction seem often to be themselves cut off from this sense of the long-standing character of the issues we all confront. So often, in the enthusiastic rush to herald the "good news," little work is done to read these heralds back into the fact that we

are "living out a logic that is centuries old," (Berman, 1987, p.29).

What whole language has to offer, and what it is up against links up to deeply seated philosophical and epistemological and cultural tides and currents that must be unearthed if the living interconnections that has made whole language so attractive are to be nurtured. It seems, too often, that we throw around terms like "subjectivity," "qualitative evaluation," "objectivity," "authorship" and the like, as if they had just appeared, as if, as educators, we could allow ourselves the enthusiasms of naivety, detached from a deep involvement and understanding with what we are up against. Often, our enthusiasm keeps us from the very difficult tasks of connection that our work then proclaims as central to what we are announcing.

The desire to analytically disassemble phenomena in order to understand them is not new, and it is not simply and everywhere "wrong." It fits in an immense and convoluted fabric of historical, philosophical and cultural interconnections. Ecology has shown us that analytically disassembling phenomena in order to understand them is not (in and of itself) the problem. The problem is that disassemblage is rampantly and inconsiderately done without any sense of it being fitting to the task at hand. It is the unlimited and unlocated application of analysis and technology that is the ecological disaster, that makes it unsustainable.

Alternately, reading whole language as something new, some new "band wagon" (Scibior, 1987) in language instruction, banishes it to the realm of "fashionability."

Another phenomenon we run up against here is a rather "psychologized" and "subjectivized" notion of authorship (Graves, 1983) and ownership (two "buzz-words" of whole language instruction). Children's words do not erupt ex

nihilo; nor do they erupt into a vacuum. Valuing the irreplaceable individuality of this child means recognizing that she exists somewhere, in the midst of the coming of winter, in the midst of a language, a culture, a tradition, a personal and collective history all of which usher up into a delicate co-authorship. It is this surrounding, co-authoring "eco-system" that places her words just here and nowhere else and that thereby "grants" those words an individuality. "Authorship," therefore, does not mean the separateness and disconnectedness of a psychological subject. It means, rather, being the coalesing point of a vast network of interrelations without which authorship would be impossible. "Ownership," therefore, does not mean the material possession of a text, but rather, so to speak, a "shepherding" (Heidegger, 1971), a taking care of and being responsible to and for what one writes and says --responsible for their impact on others, for the justice they do to the topic addressed, for the expression they give to the intimacies of one's own experiences and for the tradition of expression in which they stand. Flinging around words like "authorship" and "ownership" as if they announced nothing but good news and the opportunities for self-annunciation and self-aggrandizement (Smith, 1988a) is, plainly put, deceptive and ill-informed regarding what real authors go through and the interlacing responsibilities and inter-dependencies in which they find themselves enmeshed:

> The problem, of course, is that we are not the authors of ourselves. Each of us has many authors, and each of us is engaged, for better or worse, in that same authorship. We could say that the human race is a great coauthorship in which we are collaborating with God and nature in the making of ourselves and one another. From this there is no escape.

> This is only to say that by ourselves we have no meaning and no dignity; by ourselves, we are outside the human definition, outside our identity. (Berry, 1983,p.115)

The difficulty is, of course, that we cannot clearly, distinctly and once and for all separate out the child's experiences, from the phenomenon experienced, from the tradition of expression. Whole language is telling us that we must not pathologize this difficulty into a problem to be fixed. Rather, it is telling us that we must learn how to live well with this difficulty, for this is what propels language and gives it its life.

There is another sense in which whole language instruction digs down into this notion of relatedness and difficulty. This has to do with how such instruction envisages the more traditional, formal analyses of language and its emphasis on issues of control, convention and the like. Whole language does not opt for fluency instead of control, for imagination instead of convention, for exploration instead of clarification and so on. This would simply banish whole language instruction to a type of unsustainable opposite, set in a "monstrous state of seige" (Smith, 1988) with more traditional views. An unfortunate but clear example is the heated and unkind "debate" between McKenna, Robinson & Miller (1990) and Edelsky (1990), where the tone and tenor of discussion is rancorous, and, ironically, "unwholesome." Edelsky's (1990) statements like "They don't know gornischt (from nothin') but they sure have chutzpah (unmitigated gall)" (p. 7) gives rise to McKenna et al.'s (1990) response:

> Of the possible reactions to what we have proposed, hers represents an extreme 'camp' whose intellectual paranoia sees in every question a provocation, in every questioner, a

> sabateur. . .. Unhappily, she thrives in the midst of the intellectually foundationless struggle, which is the chief source of her smoke and mirrors." (p. 12-13)

From this "dialogue" it is difficult to see what whole language has to offer us that is different than the old and tired "paradigm wars" that we have experienced so often in the past. It seems that the unspoken, implicit pedagogical gesture is territorial and xenophobic <u>on both sides</u>. The attempt by one is to marginalize the other by staking claim to "sacred ground." Such marginalization is an ecological and pedagogical disaster. Sadly, such a "debate" is is all too typical of the sorts of exchanges we find in academia -- in journals, at conferences, etc. Surely, the relation between "whole language" and its "traditional enemies" is more intimate and delicate and symbiotic than this.

As every writer (adult and child alike) knows, there are moments when we find ourselves caught up in tensions <u>between</u> fluency and control, <u>between</u> imagination and convention, <u>between</u> exploration and clarification, <u>between</u> tradition and emancipation, <u>between</u> individual and shared meaning. Language is infused with character and vitality, and writing with force and direction when these tensions are <u>carefully held together</u> and <u>lived through</u> in ways dictated by the particular task of writing in which we are immersed.

Writers, even as children, know that we cannot simply pick or mix these elements any way we wish, as if the relations and interrelations were simply at our disposal, or as if we could simply "dump" one paradigm and "buy into" another. Very often, it seems that it is the writing itself, or the topic that we are writing about, that will dictate to <u>us</u> what is called for, what is needed:

> The line of words is a hammer. You hammer against the walls of your house. You tap the walls, lightly, everywhere. After giving many years attention, you know what to listen for. Some of the walls are bearing walls; they have to stay, or everything will fall down. Unfortunately, it is often the bearing wall that has to go. It cannot be helped. There is only one solution, which appalls you, but there it is. Knock it out. Duck. (Dillard, 1989, p. 4)

Choosing to cleave to certain strict, established conventions is like using a hammer to tap lightly on the walls of our understanding, and such meticulous attention is as much in line with "whole language" as is choosing the fluency of journal writing. Put the other way around, being <u>required</u> to write a "personal journal" because of the curricular exigencies of a particular classroom organization is as much <u>not</u> whole and healthy as being required to fill in worksheet pages.

Whole language instruction opens up the risk-laden task of paying attention to what is needed specifically, with <u>this</u> task of writing, and <u>that</u> moment of reading. It is not a sure-fire list of things to do inattentively instead of phonics worksheets -- "author's circles," "conferencing," "journals" and so on. It is, therefore, not a new "technique," or set of "tricks" that we can simply pass on to children or colleagues without spending the time to nurture such attention in ourselves and to foster it in others. We must read with loving suspicion announcements like the following:

> Dr. Terry Johnson will show you (quickly and easily) how to turn your classroom into a whole language showplace. You'll learn everything you need to know to profoundly increase

> your whole language teaching skills (And .. we'll even buy you lunch. (Reading Today, August/September, 1990, p. 32)

In spite of the difficulty that an ecologically sustainable relationship with nature entails, we are finding out that such difficulty is, in fact, good news. The pain we must sometimes undergo in realizing our ecological interrelatedness is a sign that those connections are real and vivid and alive. The same is true, we suggest, with whole language instruction. It makes our lives as teachers more difficult and risk-laden, and makes our relations with language and with children more vibrant and full, more painful and joyful. This good news does not mean the sort of grinning enthusiasm we find, for example, in the Whole Language Catalogue (Goodman, Goodman & Bridges-Bird, 1990) with its pages upon page of unhesitant, and, in the end, numbing "positiveness." Rarely in its pages do we find a hint of any difficulty that cannot be easily remedied. Given this sort of "press" -- where "whole language" is sold as being essentially unproblematic -- it is no wonder that, as Stahl (1990) notes:

> Often, in education, a program becomes the latest fad, and is widely implemented before being evaluated. Then, when there is disillusionment with the total results, the program is discarded, good and bad aspects both, to be replaced by another package. This disillusion appears to be inevitable, given the overselling necessary to get the widespread implementation in the first place" (p. 141)

Reading and writing is not all a matter of positive, happy, "confirmation, the loveliest of human functions." (Noddings, 1984, p. 17) Encouraging children to be relentlessly and indiscriminately happy about

writing (just as we have encouraged teachers to be relentlessly happy about "whole language") simply allows language (and education) to be co-opted by a sort of "customer satisfaction" (Smith, 1988a) which ignores the deep, difficult and often painful tranformative power of language and language instruction. There are undeniable agonies (Hillman, 1983, p. 17) involved in sustaining a living relation to things, and living well with these agonies in the area of language requires a "courage [that] utterly opposes the hope that this is such fine stuff, the world needs it. Courage, exhausted, stands on bare reality: this writing weakens the work. (Dillard, 1989, p. 4)

We must teach children, and must learn ourselves, to savour this difficulty and love the disciplines that reading and writing demand of all of us. This is the symbiotic relationship that is the source of the pain and joy that writers seek out, lend themselves to and endure. Seeking to quell these agonies or dress them up in the guise of fluency and creativity and empowerment denies (perhaps unwittingly) the "original difficulty" (Caputo, 1987) inherent in the wholeness of language.

The "ecological" agonies we have sketched here in the barest detail are all too often ignored, even though they are, we have contended, signs of our deep engagement with language, signs that powerful relationships and interrelationships are at work and at stake in what we say and write and read and hear. Whole language instruction is, at its heart, an attentiveness to these signs.

Notes

1. The only hope in a society working to destroy the uniqueness of the individual is for each of us to assert our individuality against the tyranny of the authoritarian corporation, state and society. Strategies for doing so must of course be left to the individual, each lighting one small candle to create a brighter world. (p. 487)

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